

A Scan of the Illinois Basic Needs Landscape for College Students

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Illinois has **231 colleges and universities**, including 12 public universities, 48 community colleges, and 2 public certificate-granting institutions.¹

Enrollment has declined since 2009, with **576,372 full-time equivalent (FTE) students overall** and **326,986 FTEs in public institutions** in the 2021–22 academic year.²

Among Illinois undergraduates in the 2019–20 academic year:³

- 24 percent experienced **low or very low food security** in the previous 30 days.
- 7 percent were **homeless** in the previous 30 days.
- 16 percent had **dependent children**.
- 50 percent had **unmet financial need after aid**.
- 21 percent had **unmet financial need exceeding \$10,000**; 18 percent of students at public institutions had unmet need exceeding \$10,000.
- 15 percent participated in the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**.

In the last several years, states, systems, and colleges in the Great Lakes region have made strong investments to improve college students' basic needs security, which helps support college access and completion. Basic needs include income, food, housing, health, mental health and well-being, child care, transportation, and technology. The Urban Institute was funded by Joyce Foundation and ECMC Foundation to conduct a landscape scan of policy and partnership efforts to alleviate student basic needs insecurity in six Great Lakes states: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. For this fact sheet, we interviewed Illinois stakeholders and reviewed documentation to describe the basic needs support landscape in postsecondary education.

HIGHER EDUCATION BODIES

A few entities play a large role in the Illinois higher education system:

- **Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE)**. A coordinating body of 16 members for the public system of colleges and universities, the IBHE recommends budgetary needs, maintains data, and approves the operation and programs of higher education institutions in the state.
- **Illinois Community College Board (ICCB)**. An 11-member body appointed by the Governor, ICCB is responsible for maintaining a centralized data system on student enrollment, completion, and characteristics across community colleges.
- **Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC)**. A 10-member panel that offers information and guidance to Illinois students pursuing a postsecondary credential, ISAC also offers grants, scholarships, and loan repayment, the largest of which is the Monetary Assistance Program (MAP). MAP annually awards over \$700 million in grants.⁴

HIGHLIGHTS

Illinois is making notable efforts to target on- and off-campus students with basic needs support.

- **Benefits navigation**. In 2022, Illinois passed the “benefit navigator law,” which designates a staff member at each public institution of higher education who is responsible for helping students determine eligibility for public benefits and other services.
- **Housing and undocumented student navigation**. Illinois requires HOUSE (Housing and Opportunities that are Useful for Students' Excellence) and undocumented student liaisons at every public Illinois college.⁵ Housing liaisons connect students

to on- and off-campus resources and prioritize housing placement for homeless students. In addition, the Chicago Housing Authority partners with City Colleges of Chicago to provide housing services to students. The undocumented student liaison provides financial aid and academic supports.

- **Mental health.** In 2019, the Illinois General Assembly passed the Mental Health Early Action on Campus Act (MHEACA), which was funded in FY23 with \$19 million in appropriations for supporting student mental health in public colleges. Before this legislation was passed, Young Invincibles, NAMI Chicago, and colleges from around the state worked together to advocate for Governor Pritzker to fund mental health services on campuses.
- **Nutrition assistance.** Some colleges around the state partner with mobile markets and local food banks. Many institutions also have their own food pantries. The Greater Chicago Food Depository, in addition to providing free groceries and food pantry services, connects community members to other benefits and workforce programs.
- **Child care.** The Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) administers the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), which assists low-income parents with child care payments through 16 resource and referral agencies throughout the state. It is available to high school and college students and ISAC is required to provide CCAP information to MAP college students.
- **Transportation.** Full-time students enrolled at participating Illinois institutions can use the UPass program for unlimited rides on public transit options provided by the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA).⁶

OPPORTUNITIES

Many opportunities exist to improve students' basic needs security through state policy. A few opportunities raised by interviewees in the state include the following:

- **Improve basic needs data collection.** Although some colleges and nonprofits in Illinois gather basic needs data, no systematic state-level reporting exists. Comprehensive statewide data collection on student basic needs would enable practitioners and policymakers to identify gaps and priorities more effectively.
- **Increase investment in higher education.** Many state stakeholders reflected on the long-term disinvestment in higher education in Illinois. The Commission on Equitable Public University Funding found that Illinois universities are underfunded by about \$1.4 billion.⁷ Fully funding institutions would help colleges provide the basic supports and resources students need.
- **Implement benefits navigation centers.** More funding in Illinois for mandated colleges could better support full-service, highly accessible benefits navigation centers, staffed with trained navigators who help students access services and public assistance programs. The benefit navigator law provides a good foundation.
- **Create structures for cross-sector collaboration.** Many agencies in Illinois have individual partnerships with each other, but no coordinated state-wide efforts support students' basic needs. Some states have a Basic Needs Task Force, which could be replicated in Illinois.
- **Student voice is important.** Stakeholders described that student expertise in basic needs is necessary inform recommendations and policies. Capitalizing on the knowledge of Young Invincibles could also help support student advocacy and expertise informing change.

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 2022).

² National Center for Education Statistics, *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 2022).

³ National Center for Education Statistics, *National Postsecondary Student Aid Study* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 2022).

⁴ "About ISAC," Illinois Student Assistance Commission, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.isac.org/about-isac/>.

⁵ "Tips for Illinois Homeless Higher Education Liaisons," School House Connection, last updated August 2022, <https://www.ibhe.org/assets/files/liaison/Tips-for-Homeless-Higher-Education-Liaisons>; Public Act 102-0475, Illinois General Assembly (2021), <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp>.

⁶ "Upass," Transit Chicago, accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.transitchicago.com/upass/>.

⁷ Cole Longcor, "State Commission Says Illinois Underfunds Public Universities by \$1.4 Billion," Capitol News Illinois, March 6, 2024, <https://capitolnewsillinois.com/news/state-commission-says-illinois-underfunds-public-universities-by-14-billion>.